

**Martin Luther King**

# THE LIFE OF REVEREND DR MARTIN LUTHER KING

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# INTRODUCTION

The statue of the Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr stands between Oscar Romero (right) and the Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia (left) outside Westminster Abbey.



Above the Great West Door of the world famous Westminster Abbey in London stands a marble statue of Martin Luther King. Dr King is flanked by nine other twentieth-century Christian “martyrs” who lost their lives to religious, racial and political intolerance. King is arguably the most famous of these ten marble effigies, which include Archbishop Oscar Romero and the less well known Chinese evangelist Wang Zhiming.

There is something curious and a tad jarring about seeing King’s black visage represented in the shiny white stone. The incongruity of King’s

beautiful African features – full lips and broad nose – veiled in a pallid countenance gives his statue a surreal aspect. Yet this visual dissonance is very much a metaphor for the “whitewashing” of King’s ideas and image since his assassination.

Over forty years after his assassination, King remains a colossus who is admired around the globe. His name has become synonymous with any struggle against injustice; he has ethical currency – many people cite King as the source of inspiration for their efforts to change a situation. In the USA both the political “left” and “right” use his words to justify a range of political decisions. King is beloved in Africa – he attended Ghana’s independence celebrations in 1957, and saw real synergy between the struggles of Africans and African Americans to obtain real freedom.

He is admired in India, where he is likened to Mahatma Gandhi. The Dalits of that country see him as an inspiration in their fight for their rights. King famously visited the UK on his way to collect his Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in December 1964, and his stay inspired the emergence of race equality organizations. And the inexorable rise of Black History Month, which is marked in October and February in the UK and USA respectively, is still a mainstay for lessons about King. In most societies that grapple with racism there are invariably calls for leaders in the vein of King who can be an advocate for minorities facing discrimination.

The advent of the first African-American president in the USA, King’s homeland, has caused many to reassess his legacy, especially in the light of his legendary 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, with its themes of brotherly love and peace. And it is this aspect of King which most people are familiar with – the colour-blind advocate of non-violence, the apostle of cheek-turning, who fused the best of Christ’s and Gandhi’s teachings to bring about change.

Ghana, West Africa.



When I was a young man growing up in Bradford, West Yorkshire, King was second only to Jesus within our Christian household. He was educated, articulate and, most of all, moderate. The books I read about him were little more than hagiographies which presented a Christ-like figure who called on black people to love their white counterparts, irrespective of whether they were violent or hateful. This chimed with the Christian teachings I received on agape and sacrificial love. In the case of King, it asked black people to suffer to redeem a society that had excluded them. King was deemed the acceptable face of the civil rights struggle, one with whom white people felt comfortable, and one whose virtues they were keen to extol. This was in direct contrast to someone like Malcolm X, who had little time for non-violence or cheek-turning.

By the time I arrived at university, there was a resurgence of the black consciousness movement on both sides of the Atlantic, with an interest in all things African. This coincided with Spike Lee's cinematic release *Malcolm X*, a box office success which made the world more aware of the life of the black



Malcolm X, the African-American Muslim minister and human rights activist, speaks at a press conference. Malcolm X was a harsh detractor of white America for its perennial racism against African Americans. And for most of his public life he remained a critic of Martin Luther King for his stance on civil rights.

Modern-day downtown Atlanta, Georgia, the city of Martin Luther King's birth.

Muslim activist. Unlike King, Malcolm X seemed to speak with unabashed pride about “blackness”, and appeared to possess an analysis of the black condition that was relevant, credible and timeless.

Malcolm X seduced me, as he did many of my peers. King’s message and method became open to serious critique. In comparison to Malcolm X, King seemed a “meek and mild” figure who had little to say about the black condition in Britain, or elsewhere. His name appeared the embodiment of accommodation, and this disdain became all the more acute when those considered reactionaries peppered their speeches with his words. What made matters worse was the growing “King industry”, which pumped out a range of materials presenting a sanctified image of a man who was all things to all people – only those who idolized Genghis Khan would have had a problem with him.

Yet, for a whole generation of young black people, this crossover appeal was regarded as a double-cross. We wanted an icon that was unapologetically black, whose words and ideas still spoke powerfully for a community that was considered the last, the least, and at times lost. King did not appear to do this, and as a result the initials “MLK” equated to “Meek Lightweight King”, a man of acquiescence. And the Reverend Ralph Abernathy’s controversial tome, *The Walls Come Tumbling Down*, which exposed King’s many sexual indiscretions, only increased the cynicism toward him. When juxtaposed with Malcolm X, he appeared unable to match his Muslim counterpart’s principles and philosophy.

My views on King changed radically after a visit to Atlanta, Georgia, in the mid 1990s. This trip gave me an opportunity to get behind the façade of the powerful image-making industry, to discover the real King. And it is this man that I seek to portray in this biography; a man who was always more of



a radical than a conservative, in both his social attitudes and politics. King’s initial nuanced opinions on race, politics, war, economics, and American society were typical of his cautious radicalism. At the time of his death, the former *Time* magazine “Man of the Year” was virtually persona non grata among the political classes, and the purveyor of unpalatable truths for many erstwhile white American liberals.

It is my contention that the King myth was cemented by the “I Have a Dream” speech, with its utopian/heaven-like references of “all God’s children” living together in harmony. Such has been the iconic impact of King delivering these evocative words from the podium at the Lincoln Memorial that they have come to define the man and his work. The events of that historic day are unhelpful for any serious assessment of King. That well-crafted and superbly delivered speech cast him as a “dreamer” and left him open to accusations that he ought to wake up to the nightmare facing African Americans. And it was this that led to the indictment that he was a colour-blind campaigner who cared more about putting white people at

Barack Hussein Obama takes the oath as the USA's 44th president. With him is his wife, Michelle, and his daughters Malia and Sasha.

ease than dealing with the problems affecting African Americans. While it is true that King was no Malcolm X in his attitude to race issues, his complex but unambiguous approach held in tension a desire to create real racial harmony and integration in America with the necessity to affirm African-American self-worth and promote black agency.

King was also courageous and heroic. Unlike Malcolm X, who found himself in prison for larceny, King was incarcerated well over a dozen times for his stance on black rights and freedom. Moreover, he was prepared to use any means necessary, apart from violence, to effect change. He marched, petitioned, lobbied, lectured, preached and was arrested in the name of freedom. (He appeared to like his food too much to fast as his idol, Gandhi, did.) King was willing to face down detractors, both black and white, in order to explain his views. During the whole Black Power furore in 1966, he met with radicals to discuss his views on Black Power and black consciousness.

Thankfully, people are no longer asked to choose between the ideologies of King and Malcolm X for answers to the black condition. Both are two sides of the same coin, and there is clear evidence that they were heading in a similar leftward political direction at the time of their respective assassinations. Both were critical of unfettered capitalism, which they blamed for inequality and exploitation. King's critique of free enterprise was bound up in his censure of war, racism and poverty. At this point in his life he was a radical or revolutionary, often to be found debating the Vietnam War with colourful characters linked to the counterculture. King's Poor People's Campaign planned to dramatize economic inequalities in Washington DC. King would not live to see his last audacious campaign, and while a single bullet would end his life, his legacy lives on today.

For some, the election of the first African-American president is the fulfilment of King's dream, in which a person is judged by the content of their character rather than their skin colour. Whether this is an accurate barometer by which to assess King's dream is open to debate; what is beyond doubt is that without King there would be no President Obama.



Most early accounts of King's life were trite and anodyne. Thankfully, critical scholarship, greater access to formerly secret FBI files, and Ralph Abernathy's autobiography have resulted in more rigorous, earthy depictions of King. In our highly critical, ultra judgmental age, those who are motivated more by prurience than scholarship have delved into every facet of King's (personal) life, leading some to question the measure of the man. Yet despite all this, King remains a hero and inspirational figure. His foibles and indiscretions appear to have humanized him, made his virtues attainable, and ideas accessible.

This book aims to offer a lively, highly informative yet thought-provoking reappraisal of a man whom many people "think they know". I am keen for readers to recognize there was more to King than "I Have a Dream", as he was a clever, complex, and sometimes conflicted man whom it has been hard to categorize. His theology, philosophy, and political opinions are profound and subtle. Above all, he was a man who lived and died trying "to love and serve humanity", and this book will reveal the struggles, pains, controversies and triumphs connected to this.